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ABSTRACT

Approximately 65 adult educators enrolled in 4 courses toward a certificate in Adult and Continuing Education at the University of Alberta, Canada, were introduced to Deshler's (1990) process of creating and analyzing personal metaphors of practice. They developed a metaphor to describe their practice and shared it in small groups that helped extend, clarify, and respond to each metaphoric picture through dialogue. Analysis examined both the content of the metaphors and the process through which participants constructed them. The educators' written and oral descriptions of metaphors were examined in terms of the way these images represented the teaching-learning process. Findings included the following: the metaphor-making process was distinctly unique for each person; it was a self-validation; it helped educators understand other educators; and participants were reluctant to deconstruct their personal metaphors. Six general themes emerged in the metaphoric representations of the role of adult educator: adult educator as tour guide, firestarter, outfitter, caregiver, dispenser, and good host. Overall, the key characteristics of the role of the adult educator, illustrated in personal metaphors of practice developed by practicing educators, emphasized the educator as a nurturing guide to help learners explore or consume something already there. (Contains 16 references.) (YLB)

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Firestarters and Outfitters: Metaphors of Adult Educators

by Tara J. Fenwick, St. Francis Xavier University

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Firestarters and Outfitters: Metaphors of Adult Educators

by Tara J. Fenwick, St. Francis Xavier University

Time is but a stream I go a-fishing-in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars. -Thoreau

Thoreau's words perhaps can be stretched to reflect the process of "metaphorizing", the act of naming provocative images to represent amorphous parts of experience, and the resulting effect upon the mind of these images. Once conjured into existence a metaphor functions somewhat like a pool of water, offering both refreshment and reflection. This study explores the metaphors developed by a group of adult educators to describe their practice, beginning with a class activity developed to help educators become more self-aware and self-reflexively critical about what they do in their practice, and why they do it. The activity was based on Deshler's (1990) process for helping people create and examine personal metaphors as a method of fostering critical reflection. The study found that for many participants, the activity of generating metaphors was a powerful affirmation of personal-professional role identity. The metaphors resulting from the activity were categorized into six themes including firestarters and outfitters, tour guides and care-givers, dispensers and good hosts, all of which provide insights into these educators' priorities in the teaching-learning process.

Background: Metaphors and Professionals' Construction of Knowledge

The power of metaphor lies in connecting images. Metaphor is Greek for transfer (meta means trans, or "across"; phor means fer or "ferry"). Metaphors are embedded in all speech, actions, and the life constructed around them: "our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p.3). Images, the language of metaphors, are rich nodes of sensory-emotional associations. Compact and multi-layered, they convey complexity in succinct yet fluid representations that communicate in

strong, immediate, and lasting impressions. When an individual discovers an analogy, the specific connections between the images often resonate at intuitive levels that may not be immediately accessible to conscious rational thought. There are three reasons why metaphors powerfully shape thought. First, metaphors provide a compact representation of the subset of cognitive and perceptual features associated with it. A metaphor allows the conversion of large "chunks" of the information from the vehicle to the topic. Second, a metaphor provides a way to represent and express experiences which cannot be literally described. Third, because it uses images, metaphor provides a vivid and therefore memorable and emotion-grounding representation of a perceived experience (Paivio, 1979).

In cognitive terms, analogical thinking contributes to knowledge development when the act of discovering a metaphorical connection between two things implies a transfer of conceptual schemes. When people create metaphors, they join unlike things together. A primary phenomenon is viewed from the perspective of a conceptual scheme borrowed from a secondary field of phenomena. The juxtaposition produced by the contrasting representations jolts the individual's expectations and challenges accustomed ways of seeing, thus enabling more complete and powerful knowledge. Tarsitani (1996) argues that in the process of metaphor-making, the secondary conceptual scheme is liberated from its original concrete context and becomes almost idealized in a new abstract form. For example, when an educator thinks of teaching practice as "gardening", the image of garden is typically a highly abstracted, selective set of constructs bearing only peripheral correspondence with the particular concrete reality of "garden". When this conceptual scheme is applied to the primary mental construct, which in this example is teaching identity, it too is transformed by the meld. Surprising new connections happen through metaphor: by juxtaposing a very different but clear, concrete picture onto an accustomed frame for experiencing the world, new essential features of experience are foregrounded. Thus metaphors provide a way of carrying ideas and understandings from one context to another so that both the ideas and the new context become transformed in the process. If this is so, when people generate

metaphors to describe their professional identity, they embark on a continuous dynamic activity of reshaping their mental constructs of practice.

Recent research has studied the ways in which metaphors are related to teacher thinking. Most studies accept the assumption that the metaphors uttered by individuals represent tacit beliefs and mental constructs. Earle (1995) and Knowles (1994) present metaphors as "windows" into teacher thinking for researchers trying to understand how teachers construct knowledge, and as windows for reflective teachers seeking personal-professional understanding and growth. Some studies have worked from the premise that when teachers are encouraged to generate metaphors to represent their sense of self-in-practice, that these images can help clarify inconsistencies between teachers' beliefs and their enactment of practice (Briscoe, 1991; Bullough, 1994; Knowles, 1994; Speaker and Madison, 1994; Weinstein, 1994). These studies tend to focus on facilitating teachers' critical reflection and change through metaphor-generating activities, or documenting naturally-occurring changes in teachers' thinking through their representation in metaphors. Comparisons of teachers' metaphors of practice across various cultures illuminate clearly the diverse beliefs about what comprises "good teaching" that are shaped by social-historical-moral differences (Gudmundsdottir and Sabar, 1991). In contexts other than teaching, activities generating and analysing metaphors have been used to illuminate professionals' construction of identity (Edwards and Miller, 1996) or to promote transformative learning (Kolb, 1991; Deshler, 1991).

Deshler (1990) argues that metaphors exert forceful unobtrusive influence over people's lives, shaping their meanings and behaviors. The act of creating the metaphor is one of confronting and analysing beliefs that already govern behavior. His work facilitates this critical analysis to help "exorcise the 'ghosts' of our socialization so that we can freely choose meanings out of which we want to live our lives" (p. 296). Deshler developed a structured process to help adults analyze their own metaphors of personal practice. During the first and second steps, participants in the process create and extend a picture that captures what they believe are the most essential aspects of their practice. In the third step, (**analysis**), participants take a second hard look at their metaphors.

With the help of others, they challenge their visions with searching questions, uncovering gaps and silences, looking at the implications of their own metaphors in action as they are unraveled. They also compare the metaphor of their practice with their own ideal image of themselves in practice. In the fourth step, participants compare what they have discovered about themselves and their actual practice, as depicted in their own metaphors, to what they believe constitutes "good" practice. The goal of this comparison of espoused and actual theories of practice is to ask the critical question: "Is this what I want to be?" In step five (**recreation**) participants are asked to evaluate and recommit to their own metaphors -- asking questions that consider how they might, if they choose, remake their own experience.

Cautions in Working with Metaphors

One difficulty with metaphors, as Gareth Morgan (1986) points out, is that metaphors frame understandings in a distinctive yet partial way, producing a one-sided insight. Metaphors highlight certain interpretations and force others into the background. A metaphor will influence what is described and the form the description takes, its knowledge claims, and the response of those who attend to it.

In other words, the metaphor helps shape and grasp experience, circumscribing it so it can be apprehended and "known". But metaphors, like windows, are framed by walls. They let light in and allow vision out. They are particular in what they permit the viewer to see. A metaphor often simplifies and freezes reality. It's very easy to distort contradictions and important details to fit them into the coherence of the powerful image of the metaphor. Every culture contains a repertoire of favorite metaphors (such as, in the North American educational context, images of illness and diagnosis, coaching and competition, potters and clay) that are frequently stretched to represent a broad range of activities, sometimes resulting in rather peculiar melds. As well as familiar metaphors that immediately and sometimes stereotypically suggest themselves, people tend to draw upon images that are pleasant and positive in ways that appeal to their cultural sense of aesthetics. Education carries its own stock of favored metaphors of teaching or community, such as gardening

or weaving, that people sometimes seize and stretch to fit their own practice despite certain resulting wrinkles and ripped seams.

For these reasons, metaphors must be interpreted cautiously, and always with careful note of the context and process of metaphoric meaning-making. Both the limitations and distortions of metaphors as well as their powers of shaping imagination demand recognition. The metaphor imagining process is fallible and idiosyncratic. Metaphors are open to multiple interpretations, and should never be treated as transparent representations symbolizing an individual's sense of self. While heeding these cautions, the assumption maintained here is that metaphors provide useful windows into educators' thinking. This study's findings yield partial and provisional insights into the identity of the adult educator as perceived by practitioners, and the process of metaphor-making in constructing this identity.

The Methods of the Study

Deshler's (1990) process of creating and analysing personal metaphors of practice was introduced to adult educators enrolled in courses towards a certificate in Adult and Continuing Education offered at the University of Alberta. Class participants ranged in the amount and nature of experience they each had accumulated in adult education, although all had some experience actually teaching adult learners in Albertan contexts ranging from business or government training to college teaching to community development. Approximately 65 people participating in four different classes were asked to develop and analyse metaphors of practice as part of ongoing class activity. The activity was preceded with a discussion explaining the rationale and nature of metaphors, and a brainstorming session to help people "shake out" a smorgasbord of pictorial ideas to prompt the imaginative visioning process. People were given a week to write a description of their metaphor. When they came back to class they shared their descriptions in small groups. Groups were encouraged to help extend, clarify, and respond to each metaphoric picture through dialogue. A list of questions was offered to the groups to help open issues to explore when unpacking the metaphors, such as How are different learners viewed in this picture, and what is

their role? What is the role of the educator? How is the learning process understood? What kinds of knowledge and ways of knowing are most valued? After this discussion individuals re-examined their metaphors, usually in their class journals, reflecting on the metaphoric process, the meanings about their practice and identity indicated in their metaphors, and sometimes changing their metaphors.

Analysis examined both the content of the metaphors and the process through which participants constructed their metaphors. The educators' written and oral descriptions of metaphors were examined in terms of the way these images represented the teaching-learning process. The analysis was guided by questions such as, Is learning depicted as fluid or static in this metaphor? Who controls the learning in this picture? How is knowledge viewed? How is learning conceptualized: as physical activity, labor, creation, competition, growing, or something else? Is learning viewed as closed and pre-determined, or open-ended? How is the learning depicted spatially and/or temporally? Is there a bounded endpoint to the learning process or not? What aspects of learning receive emphasis? What sort of mood does the metaphor cast on the learning process? What is the context in which learning is assumed to unfold, and how important does this context appear to be in the learning process? How is the educator's role in relation to the learner depicted? What dimensions of this role receive emphasis? What dynamics or control are evident? Who else figures in the learning process? The process of metaphor-making was documented after observing class discussion and examining written descriptions of this process offered by some participants in their journals. Four themes emerged in this process.

Findings about the Process of Metaphor-Making for Adult Educators: Four Observations

1. The metaphor-making process is distinctly unique for each person

Different people created metaphors to represent their practice in different ways. Many said they enjoyed the process, thinking carefully and long to find the image that felt most "right". To

some, an immediate picture presented itself that they described as startlingly accurate. Others rejected this first picture, then thoughtfully cast about for a metaphor that systematically corresponded to every aspect of their practice. Some became preoccupied in constructing a detailed imaginative picture of their practice, and became impatient with questions that sought to interpret particular details, or which tried to force complete correspondence between situational details of practice and the metaphor. Others found imaginative picture-making unnatural, and they produced a metaphor with much difficulty.

Except for those who found metaphor-making difficult or laborious, educators said they found the exercise to be liberating, creative, and fun. Some described a thrill of recognition and a sense of being validated when they "found" a metaphor that resonated with their perception of their practice. Some spoke of the activity as "puzzlemaking", that encouraged the mind to be "ingenious" or "daring".

The contexts from which people drew in creating their metaphors were often their own experience in a part of life very different from their work in adult education: a favourite avocational activity (such as cooking, quilting, attending symphony concerts), or a past working environment (such as home construction or pig farming). Many people come to adult education from other spaces and places, and the emergence of these in metaphors of practice raises questions about how images internalized from work experience shape new ventures in adult education. It seems reasonable to speculate that people use patterns already developed in another part of life to define their new "self" and to understand the concrete relations between the self and the objects and systems of the material world.

Metaphors reflected not only the individual's educational style and philosophy; they also revealed the educator's perceptions of their community of practice. For example, a woman who taught life skills and personal development courses to learners whom she described as "disadvantaged women", many of whom appeared generally despondent and unmotivated to learn, saw herself as a "firestarter", rubbing sticks together. An air traffic controller trainer who taught

standardized regulations and procedures saw his learners inside a tour bus that he drove. Variations on the theme of "gardening" were most prevalent among people who actually taught or ministered to adults. One woman found herself shifting among three different metaphors derived from objects she owned (a Navajo storyteller doll, a school teacher's bell, and her computer). She described the process as moving among shining foils, each reflecting the taken-for-granted that foregrounded her own behavior.

The most detailed metaphors seemed to be generated by those with years of experience teaching or coordinating adult education, although detailed metaphors also arose from the pens of those with writing fluency. Sometimes people reported being struck by fragments of imagery which somehow resonated strongly with aspects of their personal-professional identity. One woman seized an image of herself as a fruit seller in a crowded open-air market; she dwelt on the brilliant colours of the ripe fruit, the sharp sunlight and the scarves in her hair and on her waist. A man suddenly saw himself as a squirrel high in a tree and emphasized his quick, clever, darting movements as he hoarded or tossed nuts to the ground. The idiosyncratic process of metaphor development demands that each metaphor be considered carefully within the context of its creator and process of creation. Any patterns that emerged, such as the themes described below, require great caution as general indicators of how adult educators actually view themselves in practice.

Metaphor-making as self-validation

Most stated the value of the metaphor was this affirmation of their sense of identity as a practitioner with a unique way of practicing and thinking that is to be celebrated, not deconstructed. The metaphor helped illuminate to practitioners an essence of their sense of their role as educator in a way that validates them. The metaphor also presented to them a single, identifiable coherent picture that synthesizes many fragments of meaning that make their practice and beliefs unique into something concrete and communicable. They were more fascinated exploring a metaphoric image which had presented itself to their consciousness than in modifying or changing it.

Metaphor-making helped educators understand other educators.

Many educators said they gained, from the sharing of metaphors, remarkable and non-threatening insights into each other's motives and understanding about the purposes of education, the role of the educator, and the process of learning. The exercise gave them a new appreciation for others' deep differences in a powerful, visual way. Plenary class discussions highlighted differences between the practitioners' metaphors of adult education and the metaphors they encountered in current literature about learning organizations, which many were reading. Their own metaphors tended to be organic or natural in derivation vulnerable and appealing in detail and involving people, plants, or animals. These contrasted sharply with the metaphors they found in literature of training and development, or learning organizations, which often tended towards architecture, plumbing, and engineering.

Participants were reluctant to self-reflexively deconstruct their personal metaphors.

Curiously, only three of the educators indicated they had changed their metaphor, or actively sought one that represented a way of practicing or a philosophical orientation for which they wished to strive in future. Most stated that the questioning process of the small group discussion helped them extend and clarify and strengthen their metaphor, not stand apart from it critically. Our observations of the small group discussions revealed that although participants usually did not become defensive in explaining or justifying dimensions of their metaphor in response to others' questions, the questioning process tended to engage them in a posture of helping others to understand who they were, through their metaphorical picture. They assumed the garb of the metaphor, rather than standing apart from it with the critical distance that Deshler's process requires. The more they talked about the metaphor, the more grounded in it they became.

Findings about The Metaphors of Adult Educators: Six Themes

Many of the adult educators viewed themselves as adventure guides of various sorts: safari guide, hiking leader, adventure outfitter/guide, tour bus driver, or intepreter in a historic house.

Few metaphors illustrated the educator's role as one of being an "artist" actively creating or co-creating with the learner. (The "potter" image in particular seemed to be a stock educational motif that we expected to find). Instead, the educator was most often depicted as an interpreter or technician, following a recipe or pattern or pre-determined series of destinations on a journey. Six general themes emerged in the metaphoric representations of the role of adult educator. These are not separate and exclusive categories, but overlapping and interwoven themes in various metaphors. Nor do these themes represent all of the metaphors (some are so unique as to resist generalization in any way):

Adult educator as tour guide. In these depictions, learning was most often viewed as an adventurous journey, typically a rugged outdoor expedition climbing mountains or hacking through a jungle, where natural hazards must be avoided through the prudent protection and watchful eye of the guide. The guide was an expert, and significantly, was not a co-explorer: the guide had been through this terrain before, knew it well, and pointed out things along the way. Neither the learner nor the guide acted upon "what is seen" to shape or invent knowledge. One notable exception to this frequently appearing image was one metaphor of adult educator as captain coordinating the efforts of many colleagues on the Starship Enterprise, together exploring "brave new worlds" and boldly going "where no one has gone before".

Adult educator as firestarter Learning became focused on igniting the learner's motivation to wonder, to seek, to be empowered, or to catch the "fire" of curiosity or the desire to know. The educator was the initiator. One woman struggled to find an image that did not place the learner in a passive place waiting to be "lit", and finally found an image of "crystal healer" - catalysing things in herself that naturally reflect and find resonance in those around her.

Adult educator as outfitter. The educator was an equipper, a master of provisions, practical details and itineraries. Learning was envisioned almost as a mysterious process undertaken by each individual after leaving the educator. The educator helped with all the preparations, building confidence and dispensing advice, but did not actually accompany the learner on the journey. The

focus of the role was first proving that something concrete could be done, such as baking a perfect cake or climbing a mountain, demonstrating and coaching exactly how to do it, and finally, outfitting the learner with all the necessary tools.

Adult educator as care-giver. Whether in growing vegetables, raising magnificent roses, training dolphins, or tending pigs, the educator was often depicted as an all-knowing and unconditionally caring parent, watching learners closely and lovingly, and providing everything they needed to be comfortable and continue growing. The educator apparently had no programmatic agenda other than helping people grow metaphorically healthy, big, and strong. One interesting variation here was offered by a person who worked many years in China: for her, the gardener-educator was responsible for large expanses of crops and wild flowers, and rotated her time among them, abandoning many to storms and other ravages.

Adult educator as dispenser In metaphors of expeditions, demonstrations, and care-giving, the descriptions almost always included a list, sometimes extensively detailed, of the nutrients that the educator provided to learners. In some metaphors, the educator's role was reduced to nothing else but dispensing provisions. Examples included pouring tea at an elegant afternoon party, giving out fruit, filling up the dishes at a smorgasbord, spraying water on the grass, or delivering the mail.

Adult educator as good host.. A theme that ran through some depictions of the educator as "tour guide" was the notion of welcoming and hosting people. One woman saw herself as the door to her own home; her key duty was to make visitors feel warm and welcome.

Discussion: Analysing Metaphoric Portrayals of the Adult Educator

Overall, the key characteristics of the role of adult educator, illustrated in personal metaphors of practice developed by practicing educators, emphasized the educator as a nurturing guide to help learners explore or consume something that was already there. Learning most definitely is not about inventing new knowledge, either by the educator or the learners, in these metaphoric depictions. The educators also did not view themselves as "artists". Those who saw

their role as creative limited their powers to what we called "crafting": creating something from a pattern specifying dimensions. The teacher's role was almost always the initiator of the learning process and its hero; the educator was cast at the center of the metaphor as the controller or director: the leader of the hiking tour or the guide of the safari; the crafter, quilting the coverlet; the cook, stirring and flavoring the soup; the constructor of the home or the fire-starter.

The educators viewed themselves interacting with people in the learning process mostly in a one-to-one relationship between teacher and learner. The metaphors rarely acknowledged learning unfolding in small group synergy, or the educators learning in an intersubjective process of exchanging ideas. It seems curious that, in a time when assessment and accountability are central to much adult education programming, none of the metaphors touched on issues of performance outcomes, or the educator's role as tough decision-maker or "judge".

Keeping learners safe and comfortable during a hazardous outdoor journey of learning was more important. The main challenge was the body of knowledge to be mastered. The motive for the learning journey was the thrill and thirst for adventure. Knowledge was often viewed as inert, transferable, as existing in objects of knowledge that are consumed uncritically, whether by actually eating or through a sort of educational sight-seeing tour. For others, learning and teaching focused on individual learners' growth and expansion, following "natural" innate contours. Not one metaphor illustrated learning as a process of personal transformation or societal change. Nor did one metaphor seem to approach the notion of "warrior" or "hero" embroiled in missions of activism.

The environment for learning occupied an unusually detailed and concrete prominence in these metaphors, possibly indicating its importance to educators when considering their own role. In fact, many educators seemed first to conceptualize themselves in relation to this environment as an understanding of what is knowledge and who are they in relation to knowledge: learners were then "added" to the process as a sort of well-hosted audience.

In many metaphors the environment was to be rendered benign, safe for learners. Even in mountain hiking adventure tales, the environment remained static and tame. The tourists were observers, not active interactors with their environment. The risks were easily conquered, and were more thrilling than threatening. One woman described a "jungle" but focused on its luxuriant moist greenery and heady floral odors - she seemed surprised when someone asked, what sorts of animals are in your jungle? Who survives? What's the 'law of the jungle'? There were no animals in her idealized jungle, yet she maintained that the notions of heat, storms, and exotic flora growing lush and wild were somehow key to her sense of self as educator.

The educators' metaphors usually cast themselves as responsible for creating this safety. The educator knew the terrain, and was retracing paths already discovered. Thus the learner was removed from the excitement of being the explorer or the artist. Instead, learners worked with material that had already been uncovered for them.

Emphasis in these educators' metaphors was mostly on the personal and local, with few references to organizational, societal, or cultural dynamics affecting the learning relationships and process. Nor did there appear to be recognition of interests, agendas and other power issues influencing the learner's role vis-a-vis the educator's position. There appeared little acknowledgment of learning occurring outside the educator's purview of action.

The theme of consumption pervaded the metaphors. Learners more or less passively consumed knowledge, whether by soaking up nutrients, tasting gastronomic masterpieces, buying fruit, or toiling through tours to consume pretty vistas or adventurous experiences. Learning was usually shown to have a definite bounded end-point. It may have been pre-determined (the view from the top of the mountain, the end of the tour) or emergent (the taste and texture of the dish prepared by the chef), but it always had a clear termination which was usually some pleasant reward.

The learning process was often represented in metaphors as somewhat standardized. Even in the most individualized of these, the "gardening" image, learners were still cast in the passive role of being plants with more or less uniform needs. None of the metaphors recognized the meaning-making process as active, showing the learners acting upon experience and new concepts, including the experience of relationship with an adult educator, to shape knowledge in highly idiosyncratic ways.

Conclusion

The objective of this study was to help open understandings of educators' identity. Many adult educators who worked through this picture-making and analysis activity said they found the activity a most revealing and creative exploration of their own practice. Dickey (1968) states that using metaphor is more than a way to understand; it is a way of re-creating the world from its own parts. This study showed that developing a metaphor of professional identity can be a confirming process of imaginatively recreating oneself through the power of a picture. Sharing this picture with others, and embracing others' pictures in the process, can illustrate and connect differences in a positive way.

The metaphoric pictures presented illuminating and sometimes surprising portraits of adult educators' view of themselves, of knowledge, of the learning process, and their relationship to learners. These pictures sometimes even contradicted commonly espoused educational philosophies and practices. But people became attached to their metaphors of role identity and were loathe to subject them to the process of self-reflexive critical analysis developed by Deshler (1990). The metaphors appeared to stabilize the sense of self into a single strong coherent picture. Perhaps the exercise of creating a metaphor preempts more fluid, multiple images of one's identity as an educator. Perhaps the act of generating a personally meaningful image to represent self creates strong resonances and a powerful anchor for the self. The metaphoric image becomes reified as it melds with one's sense of practice to form a new concept of one's identity as an educator. Thus critical deconstruction of this image, or consideration of alternate images, becomes undesirable or

even cognitively impossible. Two questions are raised by this study, and require further thought: (1) what is the nature of the relationship between a metaphoric representation and an educator's thinking about practice?, and (2) does the activity of generating metaphors of practice actually help open possibilities for the exploration of role identity, or close them?

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